

# THE MYSTERY SCHOOLS AND THE ROSICRUCIAN ORDER, AMORC

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*The Mystery Schools were centers of study and mystic initiation in the ancient Western world where the mysteries of the Universe, of Nature, and of Humanity were explored. These spiritual centers educated students in natural laws and principles so they could better live in harmony with them; encouraged introspection in order to know oneself better; and engendered within a feeling of connection with the Great Mystery of the Universe.*

*Today, the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC perpetuates many of the traditions of these ancient Mystery Schools and the philosophies that sprang from them. In this article, Grand Master Julie Scott leads us on a journey through these inspiring ancient sources to Rosicrucianism today. Each of the traditions described below has been the focus of one of the past sixteen issues of the Rosicrucian Digest, beginning with mysterious Atlantis to modern Martinism. This issue of the Digest concludes this seventeen-part series, culminating with the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC.*



To begin, let's define the word "mystery." Mystery comes from mysteria—which is made up of the verb, muo, meaning "to close", as in to close the mouth (in secrecy) or to close the eyes, and teria meaning festival. According to Carl Kerényi, one of the leading experts on the Eleusinian Mysteries, the word mysteria means, "the festival at which the secret is communicated."<sup>1</sup>

The *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* defines the Mystery religions as "The name given to a group of religious cults popular in Hellenic and Roman periods. The mystery religions were characterized by a body of esoteric knowledge and ritual that allegedly had the power to purify the initiate and guarantee union with God and personal immortality. Virtually all of the mysteries centered around dying and rising saviors."<sup>2</sup>

These include the Eleusinian and Orphic Mysteries of ancient Greece and the Roman Mithraic Mysteries. Added to this list in the Rosicrucian tradition are the Egyptian mysteries of Osiris and Isis

and the Mystery Schools associated with Akhnaton and his great, great grandfather, Thutmose III, as well as the Pythagorean School in Italy.

What do we know about these ancient Mystery Schools?

In some cases, we don't know a lot, and even if we did, I shouldn't tell you everything. Secrecy and ambiguity are consistent with these ancient traditions. The ancient Mystery Schools often required an oath of secrecy from its initiates (usually under the penalty of death) and lessons or answers were often presented in the form of riddles or paradox, as with the famous oracles at Delphi.

There is also a lot that has not yet been discovered. Egyptology, for example, is a relatively new field. Champollion, the French linguist and father of Egyptology, only first announced the deciphering of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822. For centuries before then, no one knew what the hieroglyphs meant. Egyptologists did not recognize Akhnaton as a pharaoh until about 100 years ago because his name had

been expunged from the ancient records. Also, although there are some inscriptions and texts available to us related to some of these traditions (such as the descriptions of the rituals associated with the Cult of Isis, recorded by the ancient writers Iamblichus and Apuleius) definitive texts or inscriptions are rare.

There is also the challenge of being able to accurately interpret them with our more modern minds and biases. Many of the interpretations of the texts that have been found were presented through the perspectives of archaeologists and researchers who were often influenced by their Victorian upbringings or the dominant cultural or academic theories of their day.

For example, for years the prevailing view in Egyptology has been that the Pyramid texts were only funerary texts, a guide for the pharaoh as he traveled to the afterlife. What if, instead, these texts were interpreted from a shamanic perspective, guiding not the dead king, but the shaman initiate to another plane, from which he returned with the ability to heal and to communicate with those on other planes of existence?

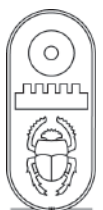
Definitive knowledge of what happened in the ancient Mystery Schools therefore is limited by; secrecy over the ages, a dearth of texts and artifacts available for research, and the limits of our understanding of the perspectives of the ancient peoples, especially their priests, priestesses,

and shamans. However, we can piece together the general themes and purposes of the ancient Mystery Schools by studying their context, the available inscriptions, temples, texts, etc., and by attuning to the spirit of the ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman people thereby opening ourselves up to other ways of perceiving beyond just intellectual understanding. We can reach beyond our own time and space to step into the shoes of the ancient mystics, students, and initiates, as they did in their time. Finally, and most importantly, we can study and experience the wisdom of these ancient traditions as it has been passed down through the Western esoteric tradition.

Christopher McIntosh, Ph.D. writes in his book, *The Rosicrucians*, “The Rosicrucian movement is part of a way of thinking whose roots go far back into antiquity and which can be described as the Western esoteric tradition. This tradition, drawing on many sources, has run through Euro-

pean history exercising a strong influence, sometimes underground, at other times flourishing in the open...A great revival of this tradition began in Italy during the Renaissance and opened up a new phase in the development of esoteric thought. From then on it had an assured, if still somewhat underground, place in Western thought.”<sup>3</sup>

McIntosh traces the Rosicrucian movement beginning with Gnosticism, a movement, which had Egypt as its focal point



of development, and Hermetism; through NeoPlatonism, including the Pythagorean strain that greatly appealed to Renaissance scholars; to Kabbalah; to the Esoteric Tradition in Germany that set the conditions for the release of the Rosicrucian manifestos in the early 1600s; up to modern Rosicrucian movements.

The Rosicrucian Order, AMORC traces its tradition back to a “Primordial Tradition.” “This concept first appeared in the Renaissance, especially after the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a group of mysterious texts attributed to an Egyptian priest, *Hermes Trismegistus*.”<sup>4</sup> Below is the timeline tracing the Rosicrucian tradition from some of its most ancient sources to today.

### Rosicrucian Order, AMORC Time Line

#### *Atlantis (Prehistory)*

Plato (ca. 428 – ca. 348 BCE) described Atlantis in detail in his books, *Critias* and *Timaeus*. He stated that his knowledge on this subject was reported to him by Solon (ca. 640 – 558 BCE) who, according to his own words, obtained it from Egyptian priests. Some people believe that Atlantis actually existed and is the cradle of the Primordial Tradition, which flows through the Rosicrucian tradition. This highly sophisticated and spiritual civilization flourished for millennia, until it declined into corruption, warmongering, and superstition, and finally ended in a cataclysm in 9564 BCE. Others believe that Atlantis merely symbolizes the unknown source of the Primordial Tradition, representing a previous “Golden Age.”

#### *Predynastic Egypt (ca. 10000 to ca. 3000 BCE)*

According to the Primordial Tradition, the Atlanteans chose Egypt as the place to lay the foundation for what was to become

the cultural and spiritual home of newborn antiquity.

#### *Dynastic Egypt (ca. 3000 to 30 BCE)*

Legend tells us that the first King of Egypt was chosen from among the Atlanteans. Later, Thutmose III (1473 – 1425 BCE), in addition to serving as Pharaoh, directed the mystery school at Karnak and organized the mystery schools together as a single Order. His great, great grandson, Akhnaton, (ca. 1353 – ca.1335 BCE) was responsible for introducing monotheism to ancient Egypt and inspiring an artistic revolution. After Alexander the Great’s conquest in 332 BCE, Egyptian culture and spirituality blended with Greek Hellenism and was highly influential throughout the Mediterranean. Through many historical paths this ancient tradition finds a modern manifestation in the Rosicrucians.

#### *Essenes (Second century BCE to 100 CE)*

The Essenes were mystics who came together in spiritual communities throughout Egypt and Israel; one of these centers was most probably Qumran, where the *Dead Sea Scrolls* were found. Jesus is believed by many to have been a member of the Essene community. Many of their practices paralleled those of the Pythagoreans. Among the different groups of Essenes were the *Therapeutae* near Alexandria, specializing in healing, as described by Philo. Health of body, soul, and spirit always figures prominently in the Rosicrucian tradition and its antecedents.

#### *Orphic Mysteries (ca. sixth century BCE to 391 CE)*

The Orphic mysteries were associated with the life of the greatest of all musicians – Orpheus. Some mystical texts describe him as being an initiate who actually existed. According to these texts, he spent



The Pythagorean School.

twenty years in Egypt and was a member of the mystery school associated with Memphis. However, by the sixth century BCE, Orpheus was definitely a mythical figure. It was said that Orpheus's music could move even inanimate objects and his sacred songs told the greatest secrets of the universe. Orphism stressed a strict standard of ethical and moral conduct. Initiates purified themselves and adopted ascetic practices for the purpose of purging evil and cultivating the Dionysian (Divine) aspect of human behavior. The Orphics abstained from eating meat and were known to wear white, symbolic of purity.



Delphi.

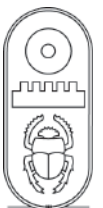
It is difficult to separate the Orphic and Pythagorean traditions.

*Delphic Mysteries  
(1700 BCE to 391 CE)*

Delphi served as the spiritual center of Greece for over 2,000 years. The Pythias (priestesses) played a fundamental role in the oracles of Delphi. They were said to have the power to commune with the invisible world and to speak on behalf of the god, Apollo. The temple of Delphi exerted a tremendous influence in antiquity not only because of the oracles, but also because it housed a prestigious mystery school. Above the portal of the temple of Apollo in Delphi was inscribed the injunction, "Know Thyself." This is ever the purpose of each Rosicrucian.

*Pythagorean School  
(Mid-sixth century to 492 BCE)*

Pythagoras taught about relationships, especially between seemingly disconnected elements of the universe, such as mathematics and the physical world, and music and mathematics. Pythagoreans studied the laws of the universe in order to bring



their minds into harmony with Cosmic reality, thereby becoming one with the universe. This was their sacred goal in life. Following five years of silence, if found worthy, Pythagorean postulants (men and women) were considered for instruction into the Mysteries, presented in three degrees—the first, dedicated to the science of numbers; the second, to moral and political laws; and the third, to esoteric doctrines. The Pythagorean mystical understanding of the universe has far outlived the actual school, including many Greek philosophers following Pythagoras, and has influenced much of Western thought in one form or another. Rosicrucian philosophy embodies many of these concepts.

*Eleusis*  
(1800 BCE to 500 CE)

The Eleusinian Mysteries arose in Eleusis (12 miles from Athens) before spreading to all of Greece and beyond. The mysteries were based on the myth of Demeter, the goddess of fertility, and her daughter, Persephone. Their story symbolizes the human soul's return, after the death of the body, to its universal origin or loving source. The Eleusinian initiations were presented in three stages: the *minor expression*; the *major expression* (lasting nine days); and the highest of the three – the *epopteia* (meaning “the state of having seen”). These Mysteries were so important that during antiquity the whole Greek world held a 55-day truce to permit travel to and from Eleusis. The progressive concept of initiation and its effect on the individual is continued in Rosicrucian Initiation.

*Isis Mysteries*  
(Fourth century BCE to sixth century CE)

As the Hellenized Egyptian mysteries of Isis spread throughout the Mediterranean world, from the Middle East to Britain, they soon became one of the most widespread exports of Egyptian spiritual-

ity. Many suggest that the Isis-Horus pair continues in images of the Virgin and Child. The ancient writers, Apuleius, in his book, *The Golden Ass*, and Iamblichus in *The Egyptian Mysteries*, described in detail the rituals of the Isis Mysteries. These Mysteries addressed the desire for personal transcendence and salvation and presented a powerful image of the protective, nurturing, and victorious Divine Feminine.

*Mithraic Mysteries*  
(Second century BCE to fifth century CE)

The Mithraic Mysteries were an initiatic mystery school in which students were gradually introduced to astronomical truths through symbol, and how this knowledge could lead the seeker to union with the power behind all existence. The Mithraic Mysteries included a series of seven initiations in which the candidates underwent trials. This combination of scientific study, symbolic initiation, and cosmic union is a feature of Rosicrucian work.



### *Hermetism*

*(First century BCE to the present day)*

Based on the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (the Hellenized form of the Egyptian God, *Thoth*) the Hermetic tradition was honored by practitioners of Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Jewish, Christian, and later Islamic religions, and many believe it represents a continuity of the teachings in the Egyptian Temples and Mystery Schools. Hermetism inspired many Renaissance mystics and scholars, and modern evolutions of this tradition are often referred to as *Hermeticism*. Hermetism emphasizes the organic connection of the Divine with the earthly (“As above, so below”) and points the way of return to the source of being. Rosicrucian philosophy is heir to the Hermetic tradition.

### *Gnosticism*

*(First century CE to fourteenth century CE)*

One of the early varieties of the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition, the various groups we call “Gnostics” today emphasized the individual coming to personal and interior experiential knowledge (Gnosis) of the transcendent Divine One which is within the innermost being. This Gnosis then allows the person to enter into union with the source of all existence. Persecuted in the Mediterranean in the fourth to fifth centuries CE, Gnostics continued their spiritual practice, moving to Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Northern Italy, and finally Southern France, where they were driven underground in the fourteenth century CE. The interior center of knowledge is a familiar theme that manifests in Rosicrucian studies and practice.

### *Neoplatonism*

*(Third – sixth centuries CE, influential to the present day)*

The last flowering of the Classical Greek philosophical tradition, the Neoplatonists synthesized the approaches of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and others, address-

ing the individual yearning for salvation from a philosophical viewpoint. Neoplatonism posits a single source from which all existence emanates and with which an individual soul can be mystically united. This philosophical school provided ways that the individual could ascend the ladder of being through *theoria* – contemplation of the Divine. Neoplatonic approaches have continued to be of tremendous importance in Jewish, Eastern and Western Christian, and Islamic Mysticism, as well as the esoteric schools, including Rosicrucian thought.

### *Kabbalah*

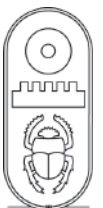
*(From the beginning of Judaism to the present day)*

The word Kabbalah means “tradition” or “received tradition.” At the beginning it was taught only by word of mouth and in the greatest secrecy. The primary books that make up the foundational writings of Kabbalah include a meditation manual called the *Sepher Yezirah*, or “Book of Formation,” whose first date of appearance in written form is unknown, but whose oral teachings date back before the first century; and the *Zohar*, known as the “Book of Splendor”, first printed in the late thirteenth century. There are strong Kabbalistic connections to Neoplatonism, Rosicrucianism, and Martinism.

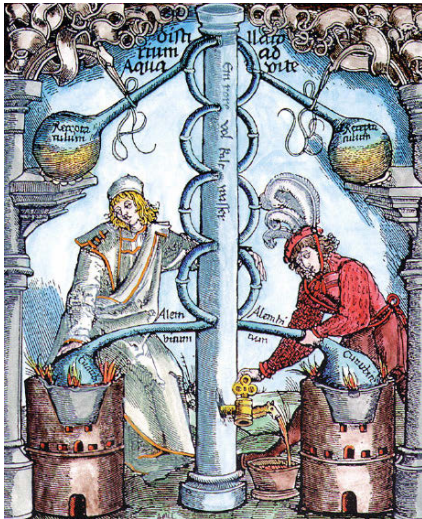
### *Alchemy*

*(Originated in or through Egypt, first written documents in third century CE to the present day)*

It is said that Hermes Trismegistus, to whom the “Emerald Tablet” is attributed, instituted alchemy so as to “manifest on Earth the power and wisdom of the deities.” The goal of the alchemist is to transmute that which is base to that which is pure. Dr. Carl Jung understood alchemy to represent the process of self-realization. Alchemy includes physical alchemy (for example, turning lead into gold) and spiri-



tual alchemy (personal transformation.) Its concepts are part of the Rosicrucian curriculum.



*Rosicrucianism*  
(1614 to present day)

The Rosicrucian tradition emerged in Europe with the publication of the three Rosicrucian manifestos, *Fama Fraternitatis*, *Confessio Fraternitatis*, and *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz*; published in 1614, 1615, and 1616. For years, Europe had been embroiled in religious, political, and social strife and many longed for a “new Reformation” aimed at disarming the superstition and religious intolerance of the time. The manifestos were most likely the work of “the Tübingen Circle,” a group of thirty German scholars and students who were passionate about alchemy, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, astrology, naometry, and Christian Mysticism. The manifestos enjoyed considerable success and circulated throughout Europe. Many philosophers of the time became aware of their message; among them Francis Bacon and John Amos Comenius are mentioned most often. In 1623, the Rosicrucians posted placards on the walls of Paris announcing that the Brothers of the Rose Cross were staying “visible and invisible” in their city. Today, the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC perpetuates the Rosicrucian tradition worldwide.

*Martinism*

(Eighteenth century to the present day)

From a historical perspective, the origins of Martinism go back to an eighteenth century organization known as the Order of the Élus-Cohen, founded by Martinès de Pasqually (1717-1774). The Traditional Martinist Order is an initiatic Order and a school of moral chivalry based essentially on Judeo-Christian mysticism. Its name is derived from that of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803), the French mystic and author, who wrote under the pseudonym of “the Unknown Philosopher.” It was formed into an Order by Gérard Encausse, MD, known in esoteric circles as Papus, and Augustin Chaboseau in the late nineteenth century, and is now conducted under the auspices of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC.

*Rosicrucian Order, AMORC*  
(1915 to the present day)

In 1909 Harvey Spencer Lewis traveled to France where he accepted from the Masters of the Order the charter to reestablish the Rosicrucian tradition in America in 1915. Since then the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, also known as the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, has served as a spiritual path to hundreds of thousands of women and men throughout the world and continues to perpetuate many of the traditions of the ancient Mystery Schools and the important philosophies that sprang from them.

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ENDNOTES

1. Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*. Translated by Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1967/1977), 46.
2. William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1996), 501.
3. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1997).
4. Christian Rebisse, *Rosicrucian History and Mysteries* (San Jose, CA: Grand Lodge of the English Language Jurisdiction, AMORC, 2005), 3.